

County in early stages of exploring construction of a new public safety building

By Steven Friederich The Vidette March 6, 2014 - 8:32am

MONTESANO — The Grays Harbor County commissioners have agreed to hire an architect to figure out if a new public safety building could be constructed on the county campus in Montesano.

County Commission Chairman Frank Gordon is working in concert with Superior Court Judge David Edwards and a consortium of other county officials on the concept.

Still up in the air is how everything could be funded, whether a bond would need to be taken out and if a potential increase in the county's sales tax would be necessary. And, if a tax increase is involved, when would the voters get to have their say?

Public Services Director Kevin Varness says one thing is for certain — any new buildings could not be built using existing county funds and the money would need to come from somewhere else.

Judge Edwards says that everything is still in its infancy. On Monday, the county approved spending \$20,000 from a capital improvement fund to hire a potential architect on the project. A request for proposals will be issued soon, Varness said.

The study will analyze existing county-provided demographic and criminal justice system use data regarding growth, changing populations in the criminal justice system, average daily population in the jail and juvenile detention center, Superior Court caseloads, calls for service and for the purposes of determining current and future needs, according to the prospectus.

The study will include projected costs for everything and ways to fund the project "to optimize the county's project approach." An overall project development timeline including recommended phases, scope and a timeline will also be included.

Judge Edwards notes that the county has funded two similar studies before. One in 1996 and another in 2001. Both of those studies will be looked at and used in the creation of the new one.

"We have a demonstrated use for a third courtroom and have proven that, but this project should be more than just about the courtroom," Edwards said. Just this week, around eight trials were scheduled, resulting in the use of the county commission's own chambers for use as a courtroom.

Commissioner Gordon said he recently met with the mayors of the county to tell them about the plan.

Sheriff Rick Scott has previously met with police chiefs from around the area to talk about the potential for a sales tax increase and how those funds could be used.

Edwards says one of his main concerns is that the juvenile detention center is in a tsunami danger zone and, increasingly, faces erosion issues at the current site on the banks of the Chehalis River.

"I'm truly worried that if an earthquake were to happen, those kids will be stuck there, in their cells with no way to get out," added Edwards, who is the judge in charge of the facility.

One potential site for the new building is the old jail, located adjacent to the historic courthouse. It hasn't been used in years and has just been sitting there with dilapidated walls.

Gordon notes there are also modular buildings around the campus that could always be moved to make way for a new building. "The one thing we're going to have to do is demonstrate why we really need this and what the benefits could be for the voters," Gordon said. "This is all still early. But there's a potential here to fix our jail so that we can use the same staff to oversee even more people and work on the efficiency with the juvenile detention center. There's a lot of good things that can come from this."